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ABSTRACT

As violence within American communities has become an increasingly common problem, the developmental and psychological consequences of exposure to community violence have become issues of import. Conditions of pervasive violence have deleterious effects on the development of moral reasoning, as they offer limited environmental opportunities for cognitive and social stimulation. Sociomoral interventions for children exposed to violence should incorporate social skills and perspective taking techniques in addition to training in sociomoral reasoning in order to stimulate higher levels of moral reasoning. Components for successful interventions are: (1) active listening and communication skills; (2) role-taking opportunities; (3) perspective-taking; and (4) social skills. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/TS)

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Exposure to Community Violence: Implications for Moral Development

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Abstract

As violence within our communities has become an increasingly common problem, the developmental and psychological consequences of exposure to community violence have become issues of import. Conditions of pervasive violence have deleterious effects on the development of moral reasoning, as they offer limited environmental opportunities for cognitive and social stimulation. Sociomoral interventions for children exposed to violence should incorporate social skills and perspective taking techniques in addition to training in sociomoral reasoning in order to stimulate higher levels of moral reasoning.

Exposure to Community Violence: Implications for Moral Development

Violence has become increasingly commonplace within our neighborhoods and communities. As such, it has been recognized as an issue of import for today's children, adolescents, and families. Although public health statistics generally focus on direct victimizations, children are more often witnesses to violence (Fitzpatrick, & Boldizar, 1993; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Richters & Martinez, 1993; Schubiner, Scott & Tzelepis, 1993). Exposure to community violence has been linked with post traumatic stress symptomatology (Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993; Gladstein, Rusonis, & Heald, 1992; Nader, Pynoos, Fairbanks, Frederick, et. al, 1990), however, the full range of developmental and psychological consequences has not been explored.

Community Violence and Care-Based Morality

Children growing up in conditions of chronic community violence are more likely to be arrested at the lower stages of sociomoral development, especially the stage of vendetta, as these children are often exposed to situations in which "individual rights and human dignity are undermined"(Sparks, 1994, p. 315-316). It has been argued that care-based notions of morality (i.e., Gilligan, 1982) can stimulate development beyond the vendetta stage, stage 2 in Kohlberg's (1984) scheme, to a principled ethic of caring. (Garbarino, 1993; Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny & Pardo, 1992; Garbarino, & Kostelny, 1993; Garbarino, Kostelny & Dubrow, 1991).

Care-oriented theorists argue that rights-based reasoning disregards the importance of empathy-based reasoning, whose goal is to promote social responsibility and prosocial behavior (Gilligan, 1982). As a result, in situations of community violence, justice or rights-based

reasoning may truncate moral development to the vendetta stage. By this view, chronic violence complicates and interferes with the sociomoral developmental process because it disrupts relationships and undermines feelings of safety and trust (Sparks, 1994). Therefore, community violence is a moral issue because it "represents a breakdown in human relationships and a disruption in human connections"(Sparks, 1994, p. 315). This care-based standpoint neglects the larger issue and actually reflects Kohlbergian stage 3 reasoning. Stage 3 is that of Interpersonally Normative Morality, where there is a primacy on prosocial behavior for the sake of preserving shared societal moral norms.

Community Violence as a Violation of Justice

Chronic violence is a moral issue in the Kohlbergian sense as well because it is not just; conditions of chronic violence violate the principle of respect for persons, which is the basis of higher notions of morality (Kohlberg, Boyd & Levine, 1986). The principle of personhood, or equal respect for persons integrates the concerns for both justice and benevolence (Kohlberg et al., 1986). Respect for persons is the core of Kohlberg's theory, meaning that justice is respect for persons (Kohlberg et al, 1986). This view of morality as justice incorporates care-oriented views (i.e., Sparks, 1994), and in the case of community violence, better discerns the principle that has been violated. In other words, community violence is a moral issue not merely because it represents disruptions in human relationships and connections. Human relationships and connections are not principles; however, equal respect for personhood is. Community violence is a moral issue because it violates the principle of respect for personhood.

Justice-Based Morality Incorporates Notions of Care

Although Kohlberg's discussions of morality have focused on rights, reciprocity and equality, part of the notion of respect for persons is oriented towards benevolence or sympathy (Kohlberg et al, 1986). Sympathy is "the cognitive organization of the attitude of identification and empathetic connection with others"(Kohlberg et al, 1986, p. 13). It reflects an "understanding of persons, and ...the understanding of general facts of the human condition within which persons exist and interact"(Kohlberg et al, 1986, p. 13). The notion of sympathy incorporates care-based approaches to morality. Ergo, morality as respect for persons coordinates both benevolence and rights-oriented concerns (Kohlberg, et al., 1986).

Role of the Environment in Moral Development

The environment enables, interacts with and stimulates moral development (Kohlberg, 1984). Social stimulation, involving perspective taking, is vital to moral reasoning because from this type of interaction develops the capacity for moral decision-making, moral dialogue, and moral interactions. The environment's provision of role-taking opportunities to the child is very important to the development of morality (Kohlberg, 1984). Unfortunately, situations of chronic community violence may offer few opportunities for prosocial role-taking.

As an individual's world-view is determined by the quality of social interactions and the cognitive disequilibrium aroused by them, limited role-taking opportunities and an unchallenging moral/intellectual environment can translate into a truncated world-view (Arbuthnot, 1992). In this case, moral reasoning will be limited to an individualistic perspective, "will lack coordination with the views of others, will be poorly differentiated and integrated internally, and will remain

logically unsophisticated" (Arbuthnot, 1992, p. 285). This is the vendetta (Kohlbergian stage 2) mentality that many researchers have described (Garbarino, 1993; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993; Garbarino, Kostelny & Dubrow, 1991; Sparks, 1994).

Chronic Community Violence: Victimization and Delinquency

Lauritsen, Laub and Sampson (1992) suggest that victims and perpetrators of delinquency such as violence are not heterogeneous groups. Those individuals that are more likely to be victimized by or exposed to violence are also more likely to be perpetrators of violence. It has been hypothesized that individuals exposed to violence are more likely to have sociomoral development arrested at stage 2; analogously, moral reasoning in delinquents has been found to be limited to stages 1 and 2 (Jennings, Kilkenny & Kohlberg, 1983). As victims and perpetrators of community violence reside in a shared meso-, exo-, and macrosytem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), they should not be regarded as mutually exclusive categories. Therefore, strategies of victimization and delinquency prevention should be merged.

Components for a Successful Socio-Moral Intervention with Youth Exposed to Community Violence Intervention

Active listening and communication skills.

Many children and adolescents have difficulty paying attention to what others have to say and are often unable to express themselves without provoking hostility or defensiveness. Few interventions, socio-moral or otherwise, will be successful if the target youth are lacking in basic communication skills.

Role-taking opportunities.

According to Kohlbergian theory, sociomoral developmentally delayed youth need an enriched, concentrated dosage of role-taking opportunities in order to stimulate them to catch up to an age appropriate level of moral reasoning (Gibbs, 1991).

Perspective-taking.

The traditional +1 stage method of disequilibrium induction (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975), involving group discussions of sociomoral dilemmas or problem situations, acts to stimulate perspective-taking experiences and promote the development of moral reasoning.

Social skills.

Social skills interventions have been used to reduce antisocial behavior. Adolescents lacking skills in communication, negotiation and problem solving have a limited range of alternatives to deal with interpersonal problems. By providing structured training in behavior and social skills, teens develop skills to handle interpersonal problems. (Hammond & Yung, 1993) As it has been argued that social skills training used exclusively has generally not been found to result in long term behavioral effects (Gibbs, 1991), social skills and moral development training should be integrated in order to affect behavioral change (Arbuthnot, 1992).

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